

Sustainable Forest Management Plan

Public Summary

FOR

Chesapeake Forest Lands

Sustainable Forests for People and the Bay



FOREST SERVICE



CHESAPEAKE FOREST 66,717 ACRES

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Background:

The Chesapeake Forest is owned by the State of Maryland and managed by the Maryland Forest Service through the Department of Natural Resources originally consisted of 58,000 acres of forest land. These lands were part of a 1999 divestment by the Chesapeake Forest Products Corporation. At that time, a partnership between the State of Maryland, The Conservation Fund, and Hancock Timber Resources Group moved to purchase the forests.

The 2007 Chesapeake Forest Sustainable Management Plan (dated July 1, 2007) came together after several months of internal Departmental review, citizen advisory committee input and public comment. This plan is an extensive revision to the original 1999 Chesapeake Forest Sustainable Forest Management Plan, which came to the Department as part of the gifted Chesapeake Forest Lands from The Conservation Fund. The 2007 plan has since gone through two revisions with the most recent version dated July, 2009. As with the previous revisions most of the changes are the result annual FSC\SFI audit recommendations and land acquisitions. The most recent of which was the 4,800 acre Foster Tract in Worcester County which was one of the largest contiguous land holdings left on the Eastern Shore.

Resource Assessment:

The Chesapeake Forest currently consists of 66,717 acres divided into 248 separate parcels distributed across six counties. In spite of this scattered character, the forests include some of the last large segments of unbroken forest in a region that is largely agricultural in nature. The Chesapeake Forest includes more than 6,000 acres of wetlands that comprise portions of 23 separate watersheds, many of which have been given a high priority for conservation action under the Maryland Clean Water Action Plan. They contain established populations of threatened and endangered species, including the Delmarva fox squirrel, bald eagle, and some 150 other species that have been identified as rare, threatened, or endangered in the region. Abundant populations of deer, turkey, and waterfowl create the basis for extensive hunting opportunities and other recreational activities on the land.

Goals for Chesapeake Forest:

The Sustainable Forest Management plan for Chesapeake Forest outlines in detail the processes and methods used to achieve the primary goal of the forest, which is to demonstrate that an environmentally sound, sustainable managed forest can contribute to local and regional economies.

This goal will be pursued subject to the following constraints:

- That the quality of the water flowing through the properties will not be impaired due to any actions on the land, and in many cases will be improved. Where feasible, wetlands, riparian areas, and ditches will be the site of watershed improvement practices specifically aimed at improving the quality of water entering the Chesapeake Bay.

- That management policies and actions are consistent with state and federal requirements for protecting and managing rare, threatened and endangered species of plants and animals. The Department will identify locations of rare, threatened and endangered species habitat and forest conditions associated with the habitat requirements of these species. Management actions will consider opportunities to enhance existing habitats and provide for corridors. Abundance and distribution goals for common species will be periodically updated through DNR based resource assessments. Habitat goals for common species will be reflected in forest management activities.
- That forest harvest levels comply with targets established by a long-term sustainable harvest plan. To the extent possible, harvest and thinning activity levels will produce reasonably uniform flows of products and contractor activities year-to-year. Short-term deviations due to natural disturbances, operational logistics, or unusual events are anticipated, but exceptions for an extended period will require re-evaluation of the sustainable harvest level. Spatial and timing constraints will prevent thinning or harvesting operations from concentrating impacts in any watershed or visual scene in violation of water quality goals, habitat diversity and connectivity goals, or the green-up requirements imposed by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Standard
- That the Department makes use of the best available data to determine what activity levels are consistent with the sustainability of the forest ecosystems so that harvests will not decrease the ability of the forests to continue that average level of yield. Ecosystem sustainability means, in addition to the factors listed under the first two bullets, no net loss in soil fertility and no loss of non-target species due to on-site forestry practices. Past and present data are limited, so future harvests will be based on adaptive response to appropriate monitoring, forecasting, and revision.
- That forest recreational opportunities will be provided as appropriate, and are consistent with the above goals for each site. Public use of the forest will be achieved through a combination of revenue-generating hunting leases and public access recreation. The Department will determine the appropriate level of public use for each tract as part of its ongoing evaluation and monitoring process.

Oversight to insure that the Department is striving to achieve these goals and is meeting the requirements outlined in the plan is provided through the following sources: The internal Departmental Interdisciplinary Team, the Chesapeake\Pocomoke Forest Citizens Advisory Group and the annual audit review completed by auditors representing the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).

Forest Management & Priority Management Layers

The current breakdown of management areas on the forest are as follows: about 29% of the forest falls into the General Management layer where the key management focus is forest products with the management toward pine plantations. This is followed by the ecologically significant areas (ESA) which comprise 21% of the forest these are sites containing rare plant and or animal communities and will be managed to protect and enhance their special qualities.

The remaining and largest portion comprising 50% of the forest area contains Delmarva Fox Squirrel Habitat, core forest interior bird habitat and riparian forest buffers. These areas have a management focus for the retention and enhancement of the respective habitat but also will provide a significant component of the forest products harvested annually.

On average annually approximately 2,000 to 3,000 acres of Chesapeake Forest have some form of forestry activity. This ranges from final regeneration harvests, to first and second commercial thinning and pre-commercial thinning operations. This equates to 70,000 to over 100,000 tons of pulpwood and sawtimber being removed which in turn provides over 2 million dollars annually to both the local and regional economies.

Forest Certification

As outlined in the Sustainable Management Plan, a primary objective of the Chesapeake Forest Project is to become a national model of certified sustainable forestry. To meet that objective the State of Maryland through the Department of Natural Resources committed to certification under both the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) standard and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard. In the spring of 2005 dual certification under these two standards was achieved for the entire Chesapeake Forest, compliance with certification is monitored through annual audits.

Certification Guidelines Premise:

It is the Department's belief that an independent review and certification of the Chesapeake Forest management plan and practices has the potential to improve the management of the forest and build public confidence in the quality of that management.

As part of the process in maintaining the dual certification, follow-up annual audits/inspections will continue. The Chesapeake Forest Project remains committed to resolve any audit issues that hinder us in obtaining and or maintaining SFI/SFC certification.

High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF):

The concept for HCVF is to insure that existing fragile and unique ecosystems are managed to maintain their identified conservation attributes. Described within the Sustainable Management Plan are four such areas that will be protected through implementation of specific management activities. The identification of the unique values of each area along with the prescriptive management protocols was a collaborative effort between the DNR Forest Service and the Wildlife and Heritage Service. Listed below by priority are the four identified HCVF layers on Chesapeake Forest, many of these areas tend to overlap each other. In two of these layers only the "core" zones are designated as HCVF, in the ESA layer this is zone 1 (where the rare species actually occurs) and in the DFS layer this is the Core areas or "occupied" DFS habitat.

Ecologically Significant Area (ESA)

The goal of ESA management is not only the maintenance of existing rare species habitat, but restoration of additional habitat to further enhancing rare threatened & endangered (RTE) populations and natural communities. In addition, the protection of ecosystem function from a landscape level perspective is also an important objective to pursue.

Core Forest Interior Dwelling Bird (FID) Habitat:

In the designated core FID areas (*forest blocks usually larger than 500 acres in size*) the goal is to improve the stocking of hardwood species. This will be accomplished through commercial thinning operations that will create mixed stands of pine and hardwoods. These areas will be then be maintained with long rotation ages in excess of 100 years.

Delmarva Fox Squirrel (DFS) Habitat:

In the designated DFS areas, the forest will be managed on longer rotations while encouraging an additional hardwood component in the over story. The goal is to grow larger trees and hold them longer on the landscape. Regeneration harvests will occur at various rotation ages based on which DFS management area, Core or Future Core the stand falls in. The plan requires that over half of the DFS areas at any point in time remain in “suitable DFS habitat” that is stands that are 30 to 40 years old or older.

Riparian Forested Buffers:

On the Chesapeake Forest the Department has included riparian areas within the HC VF designation. This is any forest area within 300 feet of a primary natural (or once natural) stream which flows into the Chesapeake Bay and may include based on field reviews other forested wetland areas such as vernal pools and Delmarva Bays. Many of these riparian areas are part of one of the priority management layers listed above.

In the expanded stream buffer, forests will be managed to encourage a mixed hardwood or mixed hardwood/pine community with a combination of diverse herbaceous, mid-story, and over story plants. Hardwood species will be encouraged to ensure maximum functions for denitrification, canopy diversity, woody debris, and nutrient uptake. To accomplish this goal for pine plantations that fall inside the expanded buffer, management prescriptions will include thinning to reduce pine basal area to allow for natural regeneration of hardwood species. The expanded buffers also provide for critical habitats and other functions that enhance water quality.

Including riparian areas as HVCF clarifies protection and future management regimes for areas that are crucial to water quality, habitat diversity and the connectivity of wildlife habitat and hydrology. The definition was derived from both Maryland’s most prominent natural feature, the Chesapeake Bay, and from the original goal for acquiring the Chesapeake Forest (SFMP page 1), which states: “*The goal of this transaction was and continues to be to retain the property as a working forest that will be managed in a conservation-minded way to provide forest products, local employment, and recreation opportunities **while protecting or improving the water quality and habitat value of the lower Chesapeake Bay watershed.***”

The Department of Natural Resources recognizes the important role that these riparian forests play in the protection and conservation of our treasured Chesapeake Bay. Furthermore, it is DNR’s ultimate goal to positively enhance the Chesapeake Bay and its associated local economies through the conservation of these important forest lands. The riparian forests provide a connective link between many other HC VF areas (ESA, DFS, FIDS, etc.) on Chesapeake Forest.

Public Use & Education

The primary types of public use to be encouraged on the Chesapeake Forest include activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, horseback riding, nature/wildlife observation, environmental education, primitive camping, trapping and access for canoeing and kayaking. In select cases, minimal development may be undertaken to provide picnicking, camping at primitive sites, bike trails and recreational opportunities targeted for seniors and the disabled.

Hunting on Chesapeake Forest

The Chesapeake Forest Lands have traditionally, been hunted (primarily for deer) by over 200 organized hunt clubs, many of these Clubs have continually leased these lands since the 1960's. The Department chose to continue this use during the transitional period following the acquisition of the property this lasted for three years ending in December of 2003. After an extensive public process which was completed and implement by the end of 2005, approximately half of the forest was opened to Public Hunting with the other half remaining under a Hunt Club Lease program. The hunt clubs continue to provide important services, such as maintaining roads and trails, minimizing trespass, reporting illegal dumping or other activities, etc. The Department currently manages 166 Hunt Clubs with approximately 1500 members on various tracts across the Chesapeake Forest. The Hunt Club lease program provides an important source of revenue (estimated to be \$350,000/year), which help support land management activities on Chesapeake Forest.

For additional information about Chesapeake Forest and to provide feedback concerning management policies please visit the website at:

<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/chesapeakeforests>